UNITED NATIONS

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General Assembly

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

A/47/322
E/1992/102
15 July 1992

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Forty-seventh session
Item 91 of the preliminary list*

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Substantive session of 1992
Agenda item 14

STRENGTHENING OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND COORDINATION OF EFFORTS TO STUDY, MITIGATE AND MINIMIZE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 46/150 of 17 December 1991 on strengthening of international cooperation and coordination of effort to study, mitigate and minimize the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. It brings up to date the information provided to the General Assembly in the report of the Secretary-General of 15 October 1991 (A/46/215/Rev.1-E/1991/76/Rev.1).

II. THE ACCIDENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A. The accident

2. Although the accident was widely broadcast at the time, it is necessary to recall the facts. In the early hours of Saturday, 26 April 1986, an accident occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine. A series of explosions blew the roof off the unit 4 reactor building, exposing the burning reactor core and thereby emitting into the environment the largest amount of radioactive material from a single source ever recorded. An estimated 50 million curies of radioactive isotopes were released and dispersed in the western portions of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), over Eastern and Western Europe and, in smaller amounts, throughout the entire northern hemisphere. It is estimated that 4 million people were exposed to enhanced levels of radiation and vast areas in Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation were contaminated to a greater or lesser extent by radionuclides. Whatever the precise figures, it is beyond dispute that the impact of the accident was immense.

3. The consequences encompass a wide spectrum - ecology, human settlement, human health, agriculture, social welfare, industry and economics. The impact on cultivated land and water-supplies in the affected areas has been severe. Agricultural produce, including livestock, has been contaminated by radioactive fallout; industries situated in contaminated areas have been forced to shut down; and large numbers of people have suffered, both directly and indirectly, in numerous ways.

4. Apart from the immediate effects there is a possible longer-term impact on the health of the population that cannot be fully known for years to come. At a meeting in March 1992 researchers in Belarus reported a steep rise in thyroid cancer among children in the areas most contaminated by radiation; a moderate increase in the condition has also been detected in contaminated areas in Ukraine. Thousands, uncertain as to their health and future, suffer from acute stress and anxiety.

B. Measures undertaken by the authorities

5. A Government Commission was established during the early phase to coordinate efforts aimed at alleviating the consequences of the accident. A number of measures were undertaken, including assessment of the extent of damage and radiation, control of further emissions from the damaged reactor, identification of contaminated areas, evacuation of inhabitants and farm animals from a 30-kilometre zone surrounding the reactor, encasement of the destroyed power unit, decontamination of the working area of the plant, protection of water and land resources, decontamination of settlements, construction of housing units for resettled persons, organization of extensive medical examinations and dosimetric surveillance of human populations and farm animals.

6. It became increasingly clear that the dimensions and complexity of the problem were far greater than had originally been estimated. This realization eventually led to the establishment of a programme - prepared jointly by the Government of the former USSR and by the Governments of the affected former republics - aimed at overcoming the consequences of the accident. It was endorsed by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in April 1990. Three republican programmes - prepared by the former Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic for the period 1990-1995, and by the former Ukranian Soviet Socialist Republic for the period 1990-2000 - had been adopted earlier. With a view to coordinating these efforts, a central USSR Committee on the Elimination of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident was set up, together with corresponding republican committees, all charged with organizing and pursuing activities to address the wide range of problems relating to the aftermath of the accident.

7. Since that time fundamental political and economic changes have occurred. The former Soviet Union has evolved into its constituent republics. The system of a centrally planned economy is being replaced. The implications of these developments for the leadership, political structures, administrative organs, economies and populations of the independent States of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine have been very extensive.

8. In consequence, some of the mechanisms that had been put in place to coordinate international assistance efforts for Chernobyl no longer exist. Furthermore, the individual States have priorities that differ from those previously put forward. Although new arrangements have been established, the above-mentioned changes have complicated efforts to deal with Chernobyl and its aftermath, both internally and internationally.

III. INVOLVEMENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

A. Initial activities

9. The involvement of the United Nations system dates from the first days of the catastrophe, when the Government of the former USSR sought international assistance in tackling the problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) sent a team of experts in June 1989, as did the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) in early 1990. In October 1989, the Soviet Government formally requested the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to coordinate an international experts' assessment of the concept that the former USSR had evolved to enable the population to live safely in areas affected by radioactive contamination following the Chernobyl accident, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the steps taken in these areas to safeguard the health of the population. As a result, an international project was launched in the spring of 1990 with the support of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) and the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR); and an independent International Advisory Committee was set up.

10. In April 1990, the Governments of the former Byelorussian SSR, the former Ukrainian SSR and the former USSR requested the inclusion of an item on international cooperation in relation to the Chernobyl accident in the agenda of the first regular session of 1990 of the Economic and Social Council; thus Chernobyl became the subject of Council resolution 1990/50. The Secretary-General accordingly requested the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) to prepare a report on the activities of the United Nations system in relation to the consequences of the accident in order to assist the Economic and Social Council in its deliberations on this item at its second regular session in the summer of 1990.

11. The Secretary-General launched a fact-finding mission to the affected areas in September 1990, headed by the Executive Secretary of ECE and comprising representatives of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Office at Vienna and the former Department of Technical Cooperation for Development of the United Nations Secretariat. Its findings were included in the report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its forty-fifth session (A/45/643).

B. General Assembly resolutions and related actions

12. After considering the report, the General Assembly, taking into account the activities of the United Nations system and recognizing the importance of the international assessment of the radiologic consequences of the accident coordinated by IAEA (the results of which were published in May 1991), adopted resolution 45/190. In that resolution, the Assembly invited the Secretary-General to consider, inter alia, opportunities to: formulate a programme for coordinating the activities to be carried out by the organs, organizations and programmes of the United Nations system involved in efforts to address and mitigate the consequences of the disaster at Chernobyl; entrust one of the Under-Secretaries-General with the task of coordination; set up a task force responsible for stimulating and monitoring the activities of the United Nations system in that field; and appeal for voluntary contributions to complement the regular budgetary resources used by United Nations organs and agencies for the implementation of activities aimed at mitigating the consequences of the disaster at Chernobyl.

13. In March 1991, the Secretary-General advised the heads of organizations and agencies of the United Nations system that he had appointed a United Nations Coordinator of international cooperation for Chernobyl and requested their full support. At the same time, he addressed the Governments of Member States, reiterating the General Assembly's urgent appeal to the international community and requesting generous contributions.

14. A first list of assistance requirements was submitted to the Coordinator by the Governments concerned in March 1991. It was understood that the outcome of the activity related to presentation of assistance requirements would serve as the basic document (thenceforth referred to as the Joint Plan) for a donors' meeting, or pledging conference, which was considered to be the most appropriate platform for launching the international effort to help normalize the living conditions of the people affected by the accident.

1. Inter-Agency Task Force

15. An Inter-Agency Task Force was established in mid-April 1991 and charged with responsibility for stimulating and monitoring activities of the United Nations system in relation to the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident. The Task Force comprises representatives of the agencies and organizations that, by virtue of their mandates, can provide direct and relevant assistance and advice, particularly in the critical sectors of health, agriculture, radiation and environmental protection, energy planning, resettlement, education and public information, industry and infrastructure, and nuclear safety. The membership includes the Centre for Human Rights, the former Department of Technical Cooperation for Development of the United Nations Secretariat, now incorporated with the Department of Economic and Social Development of the United Nations Secretariat, ECE, FAO, IAEA, ILO, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Office at Vienna, WHO and WMO.

16. The Task Force has been involved in all planning-related aspects of the international assistance effort. Its last meeting took place in September 1991 in New York on the eve of the Chernobyl Pledging Conference. A further meeting to consider the next stage is planned for the near future.

2. The Joint Plan

17. The original Joint Plan covered 131 project proposals requiring outside funding and was costed at US$ 646.5 million. The document setting out the plan was distributed, at the end of July 1991, to all States Members and observers of the United Nations so as to enable them to prepare their positions and to identify possible areas in which they could offer their cooperation at the Pledging Conference. Several alternatives for making assistance available were suggested: through cash contributions to the United Nations Chernobyl Trust Fund, through contributions in cash or in kind to the relevant United Nations system organization that would function as executing agency for a specific project and through bilateral arrangements made directly with the recipient party or parties.

3. Chernobyl Pledging Conference

18. The Pledging Conference, which was opened by the Secretary-General, took place on 20 September 1991 at United Nations Headquarters in New York. Virtually all delegations expressed their support for efforts to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl accident. However, only approximately $1 million was actually pledged to the Chernobyl Trust Fund and some $8 million on a bilateral basis.

4. Post-Conference developments

19. Recognizing the continuing need to address the Chernobyl problem, the General Assembly, in December 1991, adopted by consensus a second resolution, namely resolution 46/150. Consequent to that resolution, a small secretariat was established and a Programme Management Officer duly appointed together with a Programme Assistant. In June 1992, Mr. Joseph Verner Reed, Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Public Affairs, was appointed to succeed Miss Margaret J. Anstee as Coordinator.

20. During the first half of 1992, the work of the secretariat centred in large part on negotiations with donors and recipients on the projects to be implemented utilizing Trust Fund resources. Agreement was reached with the authorities in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine regarding the

general focus of assistance. In view of the limited resources available, this was restricted primarily to projects aimed at assisting children and "liquidators". Tentative agreement was also reached with the local authorities on the individual projects to be implemented.

21. The first Joint Plan project to be implemented involves the use of radiocaesium binders in bolus form for grazing livestock in order to reduce contamination in meat and milk. It is being carried out successfully in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine by the Joint FAO/IAEA Division in Vienna. Initial trials have demonstrated the simplicity, efficiency and safety of the technique, and larger-scale field trials are to begin shortly. As soon as certain logistic obstacles have been overcome, the technique will be applied, as agreed with the Ministries of Agriculture of the countries concerned, in all Chernobyl-affected regions. Additional funding is being sought for the latter stage. Late in 1991, and within the framework of the Joint Plan, the former Department of Technical Cooperation for Development of the United Nations Secretariat (now incorporated within the Department of Economic and Social Development of the United Nations Secretariat) also undertook an energy planning study in Belarus.

22. For three projects concerning aspects of human health and intended for implementation in Ukraine and the Russian Federation, WHO has been asked to elaborate more detailed project work plans. Negotiations are at an advanced stage with IAEA regarding an environmental monitoring project in Belarus; with UNESCO concerning the establishment of a sociopsychological rehabilitation centre in the Russian Federation; and with a major Trust Fund donor on the use of its contribution. Tentative agreement has also been reached with a non-governmental organization regarding additional financial support for a health-related project.

23. WHO has been involved with the health consequences of the Chernobyl accident since the very beginning, and in May 1991 the World Health Assembly formalized these activities and endorsed, under WHO auspices, the establishment of the International Programme on the Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident (IPHECA). The Assembly specified that the programme was to be financed from voluntary contributions and urged member States of WHO to participate in it and to provide financial support. Apart from the contributions of the affected States themselves, IPHECA activities are being supported almost entirely from a generous donation of the Government of Japan (US$ 20 million).

24. IPHECA is expected to achieve three main objectives: first, to alleviate the health effects of the accident in areas significantly contaminated with radionuclides; second, to consolidate the experience gained from the treatment of overexposure and from various practical intervention measures, thereby improving medical preparedness for radiologic emergencies in the future; and third, to obtain unique scientific data in connection with human radiobiology and disaster-related medical treatment. The programme is long term and involves studies on the induction of cancer; haematologic, endocrinological and genetic effects; immune system disturbances; prenatal brain damage;

psychological and psychosocial effects; and the combined health effects of a multifactorial environment.

25. Work is also under way on four pilot projects: (a) haematology, which deals with the treatment of leukaemia and other haemoblastoses; (b) thyroid disorders; (c) brain damage in utero, which deals with such injury occurring as a result of prenatal exposure to radiation; and (d) the epidemiological registry, which has as its objective the establishment of comprehensive epidemiological registries in the affected States. As regards the detection of health effects that may be directly caused by radiation, the unexpected rise in the incidence of thyroid cancer among young children, especially in Belarus, is now of particular concern. It remains to be seen whether that phenomenon is actually correlated with the dose to which the thyroid has been exposed. Although no other health effects of this kind have been reported as yet, it cannot be ruled out that such disorders as haematologic malignancies, solid cancers, organic brain damage and genetic defects may become apparent in the course of time and through more careful studies.

26. In the light of political changes that had taken place in the former Soviet Union, the implementation of IPHECA was reviewed in February 1992 during a WHO mission to the three affected States and again in March 1992 at a meeting in Geneva. Participants in the meeting included representatives not only from Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine but also from organizations and countries involved in post-Chernobyl programmes (the Council of Europe, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the Chernobyl secretariat of the United Nations, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). The review culminated in an agreement among WHO and the Ministries of Health of the affected States that was signed in April 1992.

27. In accordance with the agreement, the parties were to carry out the programme on the basis of equal involvement of the three States, international participation was encouraged and all relevant Chernobyl health-related projects were to be either incorporated into IPHECA or closely coordinated with it. Given the number of projects being supported by a variety of intergovernmental and international bodies as well as by national Governments and private institutions, greater coordination is required so as to obtain effective, unambiguous and creditable results and to avoid duplication of effort.

28. Since January 1991, UNESCO has launched more than 20 projects within the framework of its Chernobyl programme; these have been financed utilizing contributions (in the amount of US$ 4 million) collected during that year. One of the most important projects involves the establishment of four pilot psychological rehabilitation/community centres in the three affected States. (Construction of the premises is now under way.) Plans are also now being reviewed for the creation of an international centre for psychological rehabilitation in Kiev; the Government of Ukraine has requested UNESCO's participation in this activity. Language education is being promoted through the strengthening of existing language institutes and through the creation of

language-teaching posts at institutions working on Chernobyl-related projects in the affected States. Two significant international scientific projects have been launched: one, in cooperation with IAEA and the European Community, on the hydrologic impact of the accident and a second aimed at the establishment of an international ecological research network within the framework of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere programme.

29. Together with the Government of the Russian Federation and in association with the Chernobyl secretariat, UNESCO has initiated an important multifaceted project for socio-economic rehabilitation in a 300-square-kilometre zone. An international seminar on this topic was held in Wolfsburg, Germany, at the end of June 1992; details of the project were presented to interested international organizations and private-sector representatives, who were also able to profit from the experience of the German Government, which is implementing projects on a similar scale in the Russian Federation.

30. Other UNESCO projects involve the supply of urgently needed equipment, the development of education programmes and materials, the protection of archives, the assessment of damage to cultural property and the establishment of information services and communications infrastructures in the areas affected by the disaster.

31. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) has fielded two missions to Belarus and one to Ukraine for the purpose of formulating project documents on the revision of territorial plans for resettlement of the population of the affected zones.

32. An important development for the future coordination of international assistance for Chernobyl is the planned establishment of joint United Nations/UNDP offices in Minsk and Kiev, in line with a proposal made to Belarus and Ukraine in March 1992 by the Secretary-General. Missions were recently undertaken to those States with a view to securing agreement on operational aspects of such offices, and at its May 1992 session, UNDP's Governing Council decided to allocate resources for this purpose. Both Belarus and Ukraine have stressed the high priority that they give to efforts aimed at dealing with the aftermath of Chernobyl and have indicated that the joint United Nations/UNDP offices would play a key role in that regard.

33. In view of the magnitude and long-term implications of the Chernobyl problem, the availability of some further information, and the modest resources obtained at the Pledging Conference, the United Nations secretariat for Chernobyl is considering new approaches to stimulate international cooperation.

34. The secretariat has an especially important role to play as a clearing-house for information on bilateral and multilateral assistance from all sources regarding activities being undertaken or planned by the United Nations system and other organizations, governmental and non-governmental. This could contribute to remedying the current lack of comprehensive and systematic information. The secretariat has already prepared promotion

materials intended for distribution to non-governmental organizations and lent its support to various fund-raising activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

35. It has been said that a nuclear accident somewhere is a nuclear accident everywhere. The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant is international in its dimensions - not only because its insidious effects have transcended national boundaries but also because important lessons are to be learned from its aftermath by countries throughout the world. In spite of the fact that six years have passed since the accident occurred, all of the most serious consequences have not yet been addressed, some remain unclear and others will not be fully known for years. It follows that actions undertaken in response to the General Assembly resolutions on the accident must be seen as part of a continuing and constantly evolving process. The extent to which the consequences can be limited, and the suffering of the affected population reduced, will depend on the degree to which international assistance can be further mobilized.